# Accepting Feedback

*It's a challenge for all leaders.*

**by Howard M. Guttman**

LEADERS OFTEN EXPERience difficulty in doing away with the traditional leader-follower model and moving to a horizontal approach where the leader and team members agree to play by a new set of ground rules.

When we asked Helen McCluskey, president of Warnaco's Intimate Apparel and Swimwear Group, about creating a horizontal, high-performance team, she responded, "My toughest challenge is learning how to deal with negative feedback. At first, I took it well on the outside, but then overanalyzed, dwelled on it, and catastrophized it."

In theory, leaders understand the need for everyone on the team to possess the leadership skills and authority formerly reserved for the leader alone. That authority includes the right and the obligation to call one another—or their leader—on behaviors that compromise business results. But this new notion of accountability is easier understood than practiced. The leader needs to learn how to receive feedback, and the team needs to feel comfortable delivering it.

## Three Actions to Take

Here are three actions you can take to lessen the discomfort for both sides.

*1. Give them the green light.* Knowing how difficult it is for people to give him negative feedback, Larry Allgaier, CEO of Novartis's Global OTC business, makes it easy. "If I have an inkling that something is troubling someone," he explains, "I initiate a conversation that makes it easy for them to give me the feedback. For example, I called our GM in France and said, 'I don't think I'm as connected with the European GMs as I need to be. What do you think?'" Knowing he had "permission" to deliver honest feedback, the GM didn't hold back. His response: "You're right, Larry. I understand that the developing markets may need you more this year, but we would like to see you in our countries more often."

Allgaier believes that, "Getting good feedback, honest and timely, is hard for any executive because of the natural fear in the system. You have to disarm people if you want the truth, and the faster you can get the truth, the faster you can apply the learning."

In contrast to Allgaier's informal approach, Joe Amado, past CIO of Philip Morris USA, formalized the feedback process. Every year, he asked members of his IT team to complete a "leadership scorecard" on him. "It's like 360-degree feedback, but it's not on paper. It's person to person." Joe kicked off a half-day meeting, then left team members to confer and answer questions in four categories: How well does Amado allocate resources? Provide direction? Build capabilities? Give feedback on performance?

They gave him their honest feedback, and Amado carefully considered their input and made adjustments to
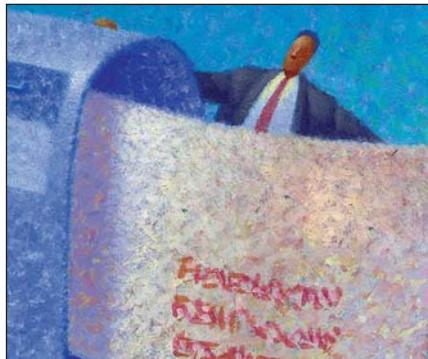


progress toward high performance.

*2. Don't take it personally.* As chief learning officer for Mars, Jon Shepherd is part of the global people and organization (HR) team. One post-alignment session included a review of the team's answers to the questions, "How would you rate your leader's performance, and what does he need to do differently to improve it?" Shepherd believes that the team's leader showed bravery in the way he handled the feedback.

"Hearing these things can shake you up and raise doubts about your abilities," says Shepherd, "but our leader never got rattled or became defensive. He just listened. He didn't try to explain or excuse himself; he didn't try to provide solutions. He just absorbed it." The leader then led a follow-up session in which he first "reflected" back the team's concerns; then, they jointly identified actions they could take to address the situation.

Shepherd's team leader was textbook perfect: He depersonalized the group's comments, treating them as a "business case" rather than an attack.

Depersonalizing feedback was hard for Roy Anise, former VP and GM of Chrysalis Technologies, a division of Philip Morris USA, and his team. He says: "Their self-worth always seemed to be on trial. They didn't understand that being questioned didn't imply being criticized personally." Anise helped the team break out of this mindset by role-modeling willingness to take accountability for his performance and depersonalizing feedback. He told them that, if they saw him not living up to his commitments and came to him with that feedback, he would view it as a gift. He even distributed a number of Starbucks gift cards to his team and asked them to give one back to him each time he transgressed, so they would feel as though they were giving him a gift.

*3. Act on their comments.* Being open to feedback is one thing—acting on it is an even bigger challenge. When Roy Anise received candid feedback from the members of his team, he was surprised to learn that they judged him to be far more aggressive than he believed he was. He received similar feedback from his boss, which spurred him to seek coaching.

During his first session with the coach, Anise explained that he was unsure of how his team was progressing and where he needed to take it.

The coach commented, "I have no idea what you're thinking. I can see why people who work for you feel the same sense of not knowing what's going on with you and why they're intimidated."

Anise bristled at the exchange. But a day later, he contacted the coach to thank him for his insight. As Anise said about his coach, "He exposed me, and initially I didn't like it; but I needed to hear it." Once Anise had seen himself as others saw him, he could begin making changes. As he projected a more open, receptive image, his team became more comfortable offering opinions and raising objections.

Feedback need not be a negative experience for the leader who receives it or the players who give it. When players deliver it in the right spirit—*feedback*, not *feedattack*—and the leader takes it as constructive criticism and acts on it, the team ends the winner. **LE**

*Howard M. Guttman is principal of Guttman Development Strategies and author of* Great Business Teams *(Wiley).Visit www.greatbusinessteams.com.*

*ACTION: Take these actions during feedback.*